

ADULT DEVELOPMENT FROM THE INSIDE OUT: CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH LIFE HISTORY WRITING

Randee Lipson Lawrence

Abstract

Learning occurs through exploring the authentic lived experience of the individual learner. When experience is shared and analyzed in groups, new knowledge is constructed about adult development and learning that transcends existing theory. An inductive approach to teaching adult development and learning through life history is discussed in the paper.

Life history is an inductive approach to adult learning and development that starts with the experiences of the learner. Learners not only compose their life histories; they share and discuss them with faculty and peers from a developmental perspective. This approach helps them to gain further insights into their own experiences and at the same time creates a text for others to view adult development and learning from diverse perspectives.

Adult Development and Learning is a foundational course in most adult education graduate programs. This course is typically taught by exposing learners to various theoretical perspectives on adult development (psychological, cognitive, sociological, moral) and adult learning (self-directed, transformative, emancipatory). While these theories are valuable sources of knowledge, they often do not take into account the social and cultural context of the learner and his or her experiences. For example, the age and stage theories often assume predictable patterns of development that adults experience. This assumption becomes problematic when we consider the wide discrepancy concerning the onset of adulthood. One individual may become a parent and/or live on one's own at the age of 16 whereas another may live with her parents into her 30's and another may become a first time parent at age 42. Adult development cannot be reduced to a series of stages. One's cultural background and family circumstances vary too widely to generalize development according to a particular age or stage.

Many researchers value narrative interviewing as a rich source of data. Participants are given the opportunity to tell their stories in their own voices. In interviewing women researchers, Neumann and Peterson (1997) found that that roles of educator, and researcher were inextricably linked to their personal lives. Baumgartner and Merriam (2000) collected the life stories of a culturally diverse group of adults. Identity, work, intimacy, family life cycle, physical development and learning are themes that emerged from their study of adult development through life story.

This paper describes a life history approach that has been developed and facilitated in both introductory graduate adult education courses and in courses in a doctoral program emphasizing critical reflection on practice. The importance of adults' life histories as vehicles for collaborative knowledge construction is emphasized.

Experiential Learning

All adult learners have experiences, which can be a rich source of learning (Knowles, 1980). Many learners however have not learned to value their experiences (Horton, 1990). Part of the job of an adult educator is to show the learners that their experiences have value and that those experiences can be a source of learning for themselves and others. In a typical adult education graduate class there is diversity of backgrounds with respect to age, race, gender, ethnicity, work and life experience. The opportunity to tell one's story from one's own cultural frames resists the dominant cultural norm that assumes we are all the same. As the learners delve into their own histories and explore the factors (including unacknowledged learning) that led to their own adult development and constructed worldview, new knowledge is created and shared that transcends

existing theory. Tennant and Pogson (1995) view learning from experience as a three step approach: talking about the experience, analyzing the experience individually or collectively and taking action on what is learned. As learners explore and articulate their life stories they discover that indigenous knowledge (Dominice, 2000) has value. They come to realize that they are producers or creators of knowledge as opposed to mere consumers.

Life History is not Autobiography

Life History is not the same as autobiography. The latter typically uses a chronological approach to tell one's story from birth to the present in a narrative format. Life history is more focused on critical events, individual experience and social context, which shape one's identity. Narrative storytelling is combined with reflection and analysis to discover resultant learning and the meaning of one's experiences. Life history is both an expression of experience and an interpretation of that experience (Dominice 2000). Dominice uses the term educational biography. While he is quick to point out that education also refers to informal non-classroom learning, the focus remains primarily on education. Life history as it is used in this paper has a broader context and assumes that significant learning can occur through all aspects of one's life journey.

Experiential Class Activities

As a pedagogical tool, I have found that leading students through various experiential activities helps free them to think about their life histories in different ways. Some of these activities include drawing, storytelling and oral history, listening to music of various historical periods and discussing critical incidents related to life transitions. The more creative activities often serve as access points to knowledge that has been present but hidden from view. For example: Learners may identify significant learning incidents from formal and non-formal education and share them in small groups. They may create metaphors to understand their learning experience and analyze them collectively. They may share stories that are a part of their family history in an oral tradition. Insights from these activities are processed in the group and later written up as part of their life history.

Looking at Life from Varied Perspectives

In writing the life history paper, students are guided in exploring their learning and development from a number of different perspectives. Our lives are shaped not only by our families and institutions but also by historical events, life transitions, mentoring relationships, and how we construct our social and cultural identity. Our decisions, occupational choices, opportunities and lack thereof are directly linked to our life history. Lucius Outlaw Jr. (1996) narrates a moving account of his life history in the preface to his book *On Race and Philosophy*. As a "Negro" man growing up in racially segregated Mississippi in the 1940's and 50's and later as a minority student at Boston College he is well acquainted with the ways race, culture and history have shaped his identity. Students from dominant cultural groups are also shaped by these factors; however many have never considered the impact of race, gender or class on their lives especially if it has never hindered their opportunities. Life history work allows individuals to explore (perhaps for the first time) what it means to be "white" or "male" and how positions of privilege have shaped their identity. Those of non-dominant groups affirm what they have always known, that race matters, gender matters.

Turning points, transitions (Bridges, 1980), or disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) that throw us off course such as unanticipated job loss, death, divorce or illness, and critical incidents that may seem uneventful but can change the course of our life path in significant ways are explored as part of life history. Exploration of these events often leads to new insights about the self and our ability to recreate ourselves again and again.

Along with the internal events, certain historical events greatly influence our lives. Students often write about the death of Martin Luther King or seeing friends and loved ones die in Vietnam as

the beginning of innocence lost. Witnessing the moonwalk opens up the world to new horizons. Social movements such as Civil Rights, the Women's Movement and Gay Rights are often transformative. Many individuals who have lived through these times have never taken the opportunity to reflect on the meaning it had for their lives. No doubt the terrorist attacks of September 11th will have altered the life course for some individuals in ways yet to be discovered.

Life history allows one to return to earlier memories nearly forgotten. With the objectivity of time and maturity, the author begins to see how early experiences such as trying to measure up to a superstar older brother, being ridiculed by an abusive teacher or being thrust into parenthood at an early age have influenced his or her life. She can then begin to reframe the experiences through a critically reflective process.

Oral Narratives

Many students who are initially resistant to writing about their life experiences find a comfort level in sharing them orally in a small group. Dominice (2000), who teaches life history as a research methodology, has his students initially share oral narratives which are taped and transcribed and later become data for written text. Our doctoral students come in with a written draft of their life history to which they have given careful consideration. They work in small groups during a two week residential institute where they exchange papers and give each other feedback. They then meet with their groups to share oral narratives of their life history. During this time they are instructed to give each person time to tell his or her life story orally without referring to the written document. Others ask clarifying questions, give suggestions and offer feedback solicited by the speaker. Many students discover that what they couldn't or did not want to write about comes out naturally in the flow of dialogue. As one student expressed, "I felt comfortable to share what I left out" [of the written version]. As they got to know one another through dialogue and group interaction they felt a level of trust developing that made disclosure possible. While the same level of trust did not occur in all groups, most reported a genuine enjoyment of getting to know more about each others' lives. They also reported that there was more passion expressed in the oral narratives than the written words due to the opportunity to observe non-verbal expression and voice inflection.

Whereas, some of the first written drafts tended to be less developed and somewhat guarded, the final drafts of the life history papers contained a richness and depth that was not before present. This may be due in part to the opportunity to speak openly about one's experience in a group of supportive peers. Speaking is very different from writing. Without the need to edit and create a polished document, conversation is more natural and free flowing. While we do not tape the oral sessions like Dominice's students, some of what comes out in the oral narratives is later included in the next written version.

Some students are comforted to learn through the sharing of life histories that others have had similar life challenges and issues. Others discover that their classmates have had very different experiences, particular those that are racially and ethnically diverse. There is no "one size fits all" formula. Therefore, theories of adult development need to be expanded to make space for adults of diverse backgrounds.

Journaling

Dominice's (2000) students have 28 weeks together to develop their life histories, which allows much time for peer interaction. In our masters program students have just 10 weeks to compose their life history paper along with gaining a broad theoretical foundation of adult learning and adult development. There is not sufficient time to write drafts of their paper and discuss them in groups. Students are encouraged to keep a journal of aspects of their life history that are triggered by class activities or readings. For example students may be directed to think of mentors or individuals that significantly impacted their learning. They would then continue to explore these relationships in their journals. Class time is set aside for voluntary sharing of the journal entries.

At this time students can get feedback from peers, which helps them to gain a wider perspective on their experiences. The journal entries are then incorporated into the final paper.

Resistance

Some students, particularly those with histories of oppression, abuse, or other painful experiences, are reluctant to write about these experiences, particularly when they are not sure who will read their papers and how they may be viewed. It is here that the educator needs to exercise a great deal of discretion and sensitivity. It is not the purpose of this process to dredge up painful memories. Students need to be reassured that disclosure is voluntary and selective. If they wish they can focus on areas of their lives that feel safe to discuss.

Many students and even some instructors are not comfortable working within the affective domain. At the same time, learning occurs holistically through body, mind, heart and spirit. When some students do go to these painful places and experience the full range of emotions they often find their experiences to be powerful and growth enhancing, even transformative. Sometimes sharing experiences orally in small supportive groups serves to breakdown walls and people find that they can then write about what they were unable to in their initial draft.

Collaborative Knowledge Construction

Knowles (1980) helped us understand how adults' experiences could be a resource for learning. In his experiential learning model Kolb (1984) described learning to include the experience itself, reflection on the experience, analysis and application to new situations. Both of these theories assume that learning from experience is an individual act. The social dimension of learning is not addressed. Life history work as a solitary process can lead to learning however this work in the context of a group has the potential to construct greater knowledge through collaboration. Through the sharing of stories with faculty and peers, students enter into a dialogue about their life experiences. Ideas are questioned, challenged, affirmed and reframed. Often insights from others draw them into their experiences in new ways causing them to rethink the meaning of the experience. Individual experience may be the impetus for learning, however knowledge is constructed socially by the group. According to Tennant and Pogson (1995 p. 165-166) ". . . we are not the sole authors of the meaning of our experience. . . although the meanings one attributes to experience are influenced by language, history and culture, they are not wholly determined or more to the point, they are not permanently fixed." Hearing about other's experience brings the theory alive as well as provides data for generating new theory. As one student expressed:

We were living through, reading about theories of adult development and learning, or stages of adulthood, and everybody was at a different stage, and we could see what was happening in each other's lives. So to me, that made it a lot more fun and exciting, but also helped me to just grasp all the information easier and made it real.

Theory to Practice

Life history writing honors and values indigenous and experiential knowledge as important sources of learning in adulthood. As students, who are themselves adult learners with diverse backgrounds compose and share their life histories based on personal, social, and historical contexts, new ideas are generated and new knowledge is constructed. This knowledge can be compared, contrasted and viewed as a compliment to current theories of adult development and learning.

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Randee Lipson Lawrence, Ed.D., National-Louis University, 200 S. Naperville Rd., Wheaton IL, 60187. rlawrence @nl.edu.

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